



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Blow-Up by Michelangelo Antonioni
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the emotions—and certainly none of the sentimentality that most films about animals smuggle in. And yet, largely because of his rigorous treatment, the film is moving. Within a brief period of time (the film runs little longer than 90 minutes) Bresson condenses the diverse struggles for life of his five humans and a donkey. The complex experience is honed to a sharpness that touches one deeply and haunts one's memory for a long time.—WILLIAM JOHNSON

THE BLOW-UP

Director: Michelangelo Antonioni. Script: Antonioni, Tonino Guerra, and Edward Bond. Photography: Carlo Di Palma. Music: The Animals. MGM.

The Blow-Up is not only a film which deals mysteriously with photographic enlargements; it also emerges as a magnification of Antonioni's whole repertoire of themes, now incised with a feverishness that borders on hallucination. Without doubt, most of his earlier perceptions are present: of the insufficiency and transience of human affection, of chilled eroticism, of the muteness of objects, of intermittent hysteria, and a Sundered social fabric. Into this always pessimistic but understated matrix of themes, he introduces such sharp awareness of the nominally bright-eyed mod London locale, that its various strata burst more freshly into recognition than in many a film by a native director.

But none of this is as central to the work as its concern for blending degrees of anxious dream into an almost documentary reality. The fact that the protagonist here, an artist figure like such earlier Antonioni "heroes" as the architect and the writer, is a photographer, involved with a stylish *recording* of his own scene, only heightens Antonioni's enigma. This photographer has a devilish flair for capturing the decorative hanky-panky, the high or mean extravagance of gleaming English camp—he is, after all, one of its creatures. But when it comes to catching real life on the wing—and, as he (and we) suspect, a particularly dire instance of it—his lens unaccountably fails. More

than this, there is an equation made between the hectic gropings of the photographer in his search after truth, and the equivocations of the movie camera itself. So that, in a whirl of subliminal hints and peripheral vignettes (never in themselves parenthetical: the camera may skip ahead, but never jumps to the side of the action), one is made to doubt whether certain events occur in the character's imagination or one's own. Not only does a paucity of narrative evidence contrast with a richness of behavioral provocation, but cinematic means oscillate subtly in their truth values. *Blow-Up*, in the end, is a psyche-out.

That Antonioni has always been more interested in probing the psychological tropisms of people than explaining their actual situations or narrating the events which make up their lives, is evident from all his earlier work. Here he seems to be telling us, not only that the "events"—fragments of social or sexual interchanges—are all that we can know about human psychology, but that they themselves are subject to canceling interpretations. Yet the disbelief which they incite is as hesitant as his whole view of human impingements is tentative. There would be, perhaps, nothing new in this Pirandellesque situation, were it not for Antonioni's emphatic reliance on the visual. What is being said, what is being exchanged, between characters, is less revealing than is how they might be *observed*. The famous "inability to communicate" which has supposedly marked his personages, far from being an indigenous trait, is nothing more than a reflex of Antonioni's skepticism about narrative as a cinematic vehicle of expression. Hence, the real tension that symptomizes this, as well as his preceding films, is the abortiveness of an obsession with states of mind that can be materialized only through a revelation of surfaces and silences. There is a built-in acknowledgement of the inadequacy of photography to trap these states; but for that very reason, a correspondingly more studied amplification of the formal means to surmount that inadequacy. In the largest sense, then, Antonioni is a director of yearning.

Doubtless, *Blow-Up* is his most personal film to date because it mirrors, or better, almost allegorizes, his own desire and predicament as an artist. It would have been hard to foresee his path after *Red Desert*, which was the most excruciating rendering of his spiritual disorientation—and of a certain languid mannerism—that he has yet given us. Now, in retrospect, a hint can be seen in his development of color. *Red Desert* had a sulky cosmetic quality: chocolates and cinnamon greys, relieved by peaches, bleached blues, and blondes. All this was redolent of the chronic disturbance that the director perceived in his special vision of the female world. More than that, when it did not recall Pontormo or Rosso, it registered an affinity with the muted tones of *Pittura Metafisica*, not di Chirico so much (except, of course, in his spatial sensitivity) but Carrà and Morandi. (That Antonioni was born five years earlier, but at the same place, Ferrara, as *Pittura Metafisica*, is perhaps more than a coincidence. Of these painters, the art historian Werner Haftmann says that their “resurgent sense of their *italianità* conjured up the ghosts of Giotto, Masaccio, Uccello, and their archaic idea of the solidity of things. With their universality, the works of these masters seemed to embody the *principio italiano*, its serene magic forms, its vision of a sublime ‘second reality.’” *Blow-Up* too, is in color, but its palette, with significant exceptions, is in black and white.

Not for one minute would this have been anticipated as a chromatic response to London. And it has in common with *Red Desert* only its sense of a retreat from full-blown or heavily saturated coloration—with the difference that one now views sensuality in a modal rather than a minor key. Practically at the opening, we see Negro nuns dressed in white, one of the first of many reversals of expected hue. The thematic crucible of the film, the photographer's studio, a marvelous, split-level, rambling warren of catwalks, settings, and darkrooms, reaches the apogee of colorlessness in its white phones, statues, chairs, and paintings (of which, one, a luminous globe on a dark ground, is reminiscent of the end of *Eclipse*). The streets

of the city, too, tinted by silvery half light, seem more than usually bled of intermediate varieties of color, which makes the few reds that punctuate the differing sequences, and, of course, the green park, exceptionally vivid. All this is delivered in a quite fine-grained, almost velvety surface that accentuates contrasts as crisp as those in *Red Desert* were chalky. Expectedly, then, the color symbolism of the two films is radically opposed.

Where such an element as the painted white vegetables in the Ravenna street symptomized a kind of social dessication, the whites in *Blow-Up*, together with their black opposites, are like alter egos, or possibly “negatives,” of reality. Nowhere is this more evident than in the critical episode in which the photographer (David Hemmings), piqued by his unwitting subject, the girl who has pursued him from the park, (Vanessa Redgrave), sets about developing and magnifying the voyeuristic shots that he has kept for himself. Born in the strange gorgeousness of the darkroom glow, these blow-ups, still glistening with their reifying chemicals, are pinned up and scrutinized. Each time Hemmings increases the scale of enlargement, he gains dimension but loses definition. It is a panic search for something hidden—a face, a gun barrel, a body—which the increasingly coarsened, black-and-white microstructure is forced to yield. A neighbor to whom he shows his results sees in them only a resemblance to her lover's spatter paintings. Earlier, this very painter had complained that he could not “hold on” to his images, and that the one form that did emerge was “like a clue in a detective story.” Antonioni, we know, had painted foliage, and God knows what else, in *Blow-Up*—surreptitious enactment of the mutability of art and nature. But more than that, it is a camouflage of realities which are less accessible than the vicarious. The true anxiety—and fascination—for the viewer is to recall, in time, a park tableau that exists for him only in fragmented, color-drained, stilled form, impossible to piece together. For an age haunted by the pink and black blurs in the Zapruder film, this quest is not without a certain horror. When the scene

in Antonioni's movie again mutely appears, this time viewed close up, the secret it may have contained is irretrievably lost, but the natural *presence* is, by contrast, so overwhelming and uncanny that it is impossible to speak of mere sensory confirmation. In a sense, it had become more "real" for us in its earlier shadowy form; now, it is simply more tangible. The one comparably radiant inset in *Red Desert* was that of a girl swimming in the bluest of Mediterranean, a fantasy more corporeal than any of the earthly doings of the action proper. With inspired perversity, Antonioni shows that, either broken down or "complete," in black and white or color, perception homes in the substratum of photography, which is never so mechanistic as to assure one of what one is seeing. Or better, how one is to interpret it.

This optional kind of visibility dominates *Blow-Up* so much (without the director claiming to be responsible for it, however) that the condition of the social encounters it reveals is altogether colored by it. These encounters fall roughly under three categories: frustration, duplicity, and indifference. The camera as an instrument for making an almost obscene kind of love, at once exhibitionistic and thwarted, is witnessed in Hemming's photo seduction of a model. Photography as a means of picturing a lyrical tryst turns out to be an eavesdropping on a possible murder. The studio, normally an environment of glossy style and high fashion, emerges as a setting for abortive, teasing sex, and nymphet hysteria. Significantly, none of these actions is *shown* as completable, or in its entirety.

As for duplicity, the young photographer himself is a paragon of it. For example, he is first seen acting as a bum in an institution for derelicts(!). In rapid succession, he becomes a voyeur (which is his, and for the time being, our *métier*, too), pretends (P) that he has a wife, and cheats Redgrave out of the film she had come for. Less consciously, he may be a creature of uncertain sexuality: stifled by beautiful women, and passive or evasive when they offer themselves to him. As played remarkably by Hemmings, he is febrile, autocratic, capri-

cious, and, outside the illusory professional world of which he is a master, completely at a loss. The largest equivocation, though, may be Antonioni's, who conceives his own stand-in to be simultaneously aggressive and timid, faltering toward a morality for which his job does not equip him. More purposefully attuned to his work than Antonioni's earlier male characters, the photographer is also more lost, more abandoned. Not only is he just as incapable of giving, as he is of inspiring love, but he is a victim imprisoned within the glass walls of his strategies of deceit. How illustrative of the man's pathos is Tom Rakewell's lament from Auden and Kallman's libretto to Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress":

Always the quarry that I stalk
Fades or evades me, and I walk
An endless hall of chandeliers
In light that blinds, in light that sears,
Reflected from a million smiles
All empty as the country miles
Of silly wood and senseless park;
And only in my heart—the dark.

It is necessary to say that indifference is also a curious leitmotif within *Blow-Up*, and one of its most pungent social comments, as well. Among the crisscrossing overlooks into the London milieu—peace marches, dope parties, and discotheques—energy itself seems drugged into cyclical and meaningless repetition. It is as if Dante had been hanging around the world of rock and roll, and found it to have been damned by the emptiness of its enthusiasm, and its pointless extravagance: surrogates rather than sources of feeling. As a result, this is a world that cannot negotiate or sustain social interaction, and a scene whose members cannot help themselves. Above all, in this ambiance of deteriorated affect, no one possesses enough credibility to generate concern over the possible loss of a fellow human being. Unable to convince any friend that there had been a murder, the photographer comes to doubt his own perceptions, and begins to lose touch in the envelope of mime which ends the film. Yet it is only his nostalgia for freedom, or rather, impulse to-

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wards the authentic, and Redgrave's desperation, which fleetingly break the general ennui. As for the latter, Moravia has described it quite well: "We spend most of our lives pulling bits of plaster off walls—in other words, contemplating reality without either entering into or understanding it. This is a perfectly normal condition, which leads many people to passivity, to resignation, to something like complacent hedonism. But sometimes, as with Antonioni's characters, the refusal to accept this condition, with its absence of communication and its automatism, leads to anguish." (1961) In its pithy glimpses of this anguish, *Blow-Up* certainly achieves *dramatic* tension; but this tension, now leaving the earlier work behind, transcends the rather familiar ideas above, through its *cine-matic* formulation of enigma.

Some last words about the formal construction, the working out of the enigma. As leisurely (though many-incidental) in its approach to climax as, say, Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (whose story it resembles), *Blow-Up*'s central event submerges mysteriously within a welter of unforeseen "data," and larger themes. Uniformly brisk throughout, the film is punctuated by repetitions, or rather, analogies. The whole piece is a network of proposals of action and dissipations of "evidence." For every addition, there is a cancellation, in almost a noncumulative, entropic format. Moreover, the focus is on, not so much what will, but what *has* happened—so that the progression of episodes is always being dragged back towards unnoticed clues—and an eventual stillpoint. If this is the greatest "reversal" of the work, its conflict of action and recall, initiating differing time senses, it nevertheless presents itself as one homogeneous weave of consciousness, in which observation is always of something nominally "out there." On a particular level, examples of "reversal" are the presence of the blow-ups, and their theft (?), the sight of the body and its later absence, the attraction of the artist's mistress to the photographer and her subsequent turning away from him, and the fight for the broken guitar followed by its abandonment on the street. And all these divergent happenings



THE BLOW-UP

are integrated or spread, some near, some further from each other, with such intelligence that while they stop us to beg questions, they do not halt the flow of general inquiry or draw inordinate attention to themselves. Even sound, always exquisitely articulated, possesses the same rhyme, as when one notices the similarity between the breathing of lovers in intercourse, and the hissing of wind in the trees. Few can vie with Antonioni in his epigrammatic isolation of "throwaway" detail, which nevertheless lingers in the memory. But the most startling coup along these lines is the overture and finale of *Blow-Up*, both dominated by the presence of some rather un-English mimes (whose make-up is reminiscent of that of the fashion mannikins.) That they play imaginary tennis at the end has already been prepared for us by the sight of a real tennis match earlier in the film. But when Hemmings enters their game by returning their illusory ball, he hears (who knows what he sees?) its distant thuds on rackets. The last shot, the longest in the entire picture, shows him wandering far beneath the camera's gaze, pitifully reduced in such a way as to suggest that just possibly the whole film up to then had been a species of blow-up. It is a terrifying implication. But no question can be more pertinent than to decide whether it is a liberating one.—MAX KOZLOFF